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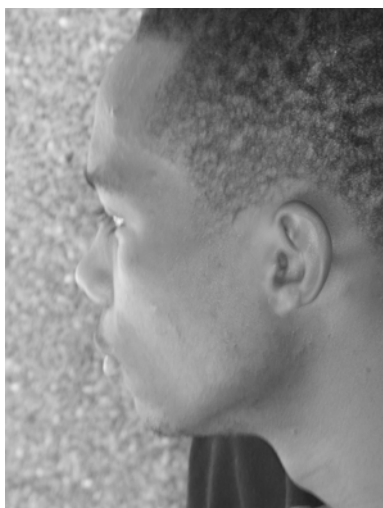
**COLOMBIA**

April 2008

## FIRST PERSON

# Child soldiers have new beginning

**USAID supports a program for children demobilized from the illegal armed groups in Colombia**



Staff Photo IOM

***“Although I was young, I always knew that this was not my path and that at anytime I could die without ever knowing the reason why I was part of the group”.***

— René, young beneficiary of a USAID funded demobilization and reintegration program.

René<sup>1</sup> was one of 14 children born into a poor family in southern Colombia. He started working early to support his family and by 12 he joined an illegal armed group. Although subjected to harsh physical resistance tests for recruitment, the desire to earn money to help his family made him persevere. *“Although I was young, I always knew that this was not my path and that at anytime I could die”, he says. “I remember one battle, which lasted 11 hours, my best friend Felipe was killed. It was then that I began to think about leaving, even though this could get me killed.”*

One day in 2006, when sent to town on an errand, René turned himself in to the first authority he came across. When the town police chief asked his age, René didn't know what to say: he didn't know how old he was. Medical examinations later showed that he was 17. His life for the past five years had been filled with fear and despair.

After demobilization, René was accepted into the Program for Special Attention for Children Demobilized from the Illegal Armed Groups, run by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) and supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with technical support from The International Organization for Migrations (IOM). To date the program has provided specialized attention to 3,577 child ex-combatants and 23,515 at-risk children have been supported by recruitment prevention activities.

When René turned 18, his case was remitted to the Don Bosco Center for Reference and Youth Opportunities (CROJ) in Cali. There, he receives training to rebuild his life and self-esteem. This Center, which receives support from USAID, has assisted 212 young people in diverse municipalities in the departments of Valle and Cauca.

René is now a coach, working with young people from the most socially disadvantaged areas of Cali. In his work, he relays a clear message: joining youth gangs or illegal armed groups is a waste of time and can mean a wasted life.

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<sup>1</sup> His name has been changed to protect his identity.